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BUREAUCRACY AND DEMOCRACY IN THE USSR

By T. H. Rigby*

The Soviet Union is a highly bureaucratized society, perhaps the most bureaucratized society the world has ever seen. The purpose of this article is to explain and substantiate this statement, and then to qualify it along lines that may be unfamiliar to most readers.

By bureaucracy I do not mean "red tape" (what the Russians call *biurokratizm*), but the practice of structuring institutions and decision-making processes in a hierarchy of offices, occupied by salaried, appointed, and replaceable officials. In principle, no decision above the level of the family and the individual is taken in the Soviet Union outside the offices of such hierarchies.

The qualification about the individual and the family is an important one. The Soviet Union is not a *completely* bureaucratized society. If it *were* a completely bureaucratized society, many matters that are now left to the choice of the individual and the family would be taken out of their hands and decided by bureaucrats: the wages and retail system would be replaced by a comprehensive system of rationing, the labour market would give way to compulsory job direction, activities outside working hours would be directed in detail—not just circumscribed—by bureaucrats, bureaucrats would decide who would mate with whom and take full charge of the rearing of children, and so on. In fact the range of choice enjoyed by the contemporary Russian is *of the same order* as that enjoyed by the contemporary Australian, though there are important differences of scope and detail. Some readers may find this statement rather difficult to accept. What about such choices open to the Australian as travelling or settling abroad, reading much what he likes, or opposing government policies? Certainly there are persons in Russia as in the West, and this applies particularly among the intellectuals and students, for whom such differences make *all* the difference. For the great majority of people, however, the matters over which the right of individual or family decision is much the same in Russia as in Australia assume far greater significance than the matters over which this right of decision is different. To say that the prime grievances of most contemporary Russians relate to their purchasing power and the availability of goods and services for purchase, is to say that they mostly are concerned to maximize

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their choices within the limits legitimate in their society, not to change those limits. The point I wish to make here, however, is not that Ivan is as much a vulgar materialist as Jack, but to clarify my meaning when I refer to the USSR as perhaps the most bureaucratized society the world has ever seen. This is not a statement about the boundaries between the public and private spheres, about the degree of autonomy or dependence of the individual in relation to the institutions of society. It is a statement about the character of these social institutions themselves. They are all run bureaucratically.

How different does this make Soviet society from our own society? Given the fact that we are all rather bureaucratized these days, is it simply a difference of degree? In fact the difference lies much deeper than this.

In a country like Australia large bureaucratic organizations preponderate in the provision of many goods and services. Many voluntary associations, especially the larger ones in the economic sphere, are also heavily bureaucratized, in the sense that their decision-making processes are more or less dominated by their salaried officials. However, there is another side to the picture. If much is run by bureaucracies, much too, is in the hands of individual businessmen and free-lancing professionals, partnerships, clubs and voluntary societies of all kinds. At a more fundamental level, much of the "decision-making" in a country like Australia is not traceable to the deliberate choices of particular decision-makers at all, bureaucrats or non-bureaucrats: in large part it results from what, at some risk of being misunderstood, I shall call "market" processes: that is to say, it reflects a balance or bargain struck, tacitly or explicitly, between autonomously interacting parts, the latter including individuals, groups of all kinds, and the government itself. The essential element here is the autonomy of particular goals—whether these are economic interests, activities like sport or the arts, or value systems like Christianity, socialism or what have you. The place of all these things in society, the extent to which these particular goals are realized, is determined by processes of competitive interaction and mutual accommodation. In our society there is a market in values as well as in goods and services. This is in large part what our institutions—especially our political and economic institutions—are about: providing the machinery through which this process of competitive interaction and mutual accommodation can take place.

To say this is not necessarily to commit one to the view that governments in countries like Australia simply reflect passively the current balance of social forces in the country, or that all groups and individuals enjoy roughly the same chances of exerting political and social influence or realizing their interests. It is, however, to assert that the facts of political and social life in such countries cannot plausibly be explained as the result predominantly of influences radiating from a single focus, be it "the capitalists", "the government", or what have you.

Let us turn now to the situation in the USSR. The existence of particular

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goals is, of course, accepted in Soviet society. What is not accepted is the autonomy of these goals. All particular goals are regarded as subordinate to a single overall goal, which is described in broad terms as the building of a communist society. The very idea that the extent to which particular goals are realized should depend on a process of competitive interaction and mutual accommodation is, of course, completely incompatible with this concept of a single overall goal. The place which particular interests, activities and values systems have in Soviet society is not something to be left to the vagaries of the "market". It is a matter for deliberate political and administrative decision. The nation's leaders and their senior officials, armed with the doctrines of Marx and Lenin, have the task of translating the overall goal of building communism into a scheme of current priorities, and then spelling out the implications of these priorities for particular spheres of activity.

What this implies for the institutional structure of society is obvious enough. Your institutions are not called upon to provide a machinery of competitive interaction. What you need is chains of command, transmitting the Centre's decisions about current priorities and spelling them out in progressive detail till they reach the individual in the form of a package of rights and responsibilities and immediate assignments. Not all these chains of command are government agencies. In form many of them are voluntary associations—trade unions, consumer co-operatives, writers' unions, the Communist Youth League and so on. But they all have this in common: their task is not to thrash out their own particular objectives and promote them within the community as a whole; rather is it to implement the tasks assigned to them on behalf of the community as a whole by the political leadership. They do not represent their constituency *vis-a-vis* the community, they represent the community *vis-a-vis* their constituency, seeing to it that assigned and approved activities are performed, and that unauthorized activities are *not* performed. Supervising, directing and co-ordinating these multifarious chains of command is the apparatus of the Communist Party. The backbone of this vast bureaucratic complex is the hierarchy of party secretaries, which runs from the General Secretary all the way down to the secretary of the party organization in the basic employment group. This hierarchy bears the primary responsibility for ensuring that the various specialized groups do *not* deviate from their assigned tasks in order to further their particular goals. And backing up the efforts of the party apparatus is the apparatus of the political police. Here the essential element is not the arbitrary terror that reigned under Stalin, but the ordinary operation of the police in administering the provisions of the criminal code regarding state crimes. These provisions in effect render any unauthorized public utterance subject to interpretation as "counter-revolutionary propaganda" and any unauthorized meeting subject to interpretation as "counter-revolutionary organization", these being offences punishable by up to seven years' imprisonment. The recent trials of Russian writers and so-called

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Ukrainian "bourgeois nationalists" and the imprisonment of "breakaway" Baptists are a reminder that the role of the police in backing up the party's system of bureaucratic controls is still a very real one.

The picture I have been giving to this point of Soviet institutions as little more than a conglomeration of bureaucratic hierarchies is clearly at odds with the official self-image of the USSR. What about all those democratic features of the Soviet constitution? What about the Soviets, to which all government agencies are constitutionally accountable? What about elections? What about party conferences and congresses, and the conferences and public sessions of innumerable other voluntary bodies? After all that has been published on this topic it is scarcely necessary to undertake here a systematic refutation of official claims about Soviet democracy. Western scholars generally, and this now includes quite a few Western Communist scholars, agree that Soviet elections, whether in the party, the soviets, or what have you, offer no choice of candidates, that the candidates for official elective positions are in fact chosen by their hierarchical superiors, while the proceedings of conferences, meetings of Soviets and so on are stage-managed by their executives. No criticism of the top leaders of their policies is permitted, nor is canvassing of alternative policies, while criticism is confined to the efficiency and honesty of officials in implementing the leadership's policies.

Does this mean that all this pseudo-democratic paraphernalia is simply an elaborate facade behind which the real thing goes on in the bureaucracies, that it has no part in the real thing itself? This is a common view, but it is a serious over-simplification. In part the democratic forms *are* a facade—the homage of bureaucratic vice to democratic virtue. And there are good reasons for this. The Soviet regime needs to represent itself falsely as functioning democratically not so much in the hope of influencing opinion in the outside world—though this has always been an important consideration—but more because this is demanded by its own legitimating doctrine and values. The legitimacy of the Soviet rulers' claims to power, and of the institutions through which that power is exercised, resides in large part in these democratic forms, and the pretence that they actually function democratically is therefore not really expendable. The facade operates not only on this rational level, but also on the level of symbol and ritual—a level on which every political system demands its facade. We have our Queen, they have their Supreme Soviet.

But this pseudo-democratic machinery is not *just* a facade, it also plays a part in the implementation of policies. Its contributions on this operative level are mainly two: what Soviet writers call "mobilization" and what they call "the exchange of experience".

"Mobilization" is defined by one Soviet encyclopaedia as "drawing in the population through legally established procedures for the fulfilment of particular tasks or duties". In a society where group objectives are not, as they are with us, largely self-generated, but instead are assigned from above,

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there is the problem of creating an awareness of these objectives, bringing out their implications, and building up a positive attitude towards them. What is required is a special kind of high-pressure public relations job. This job is in part one for the mass media, but a larger part is played by meetings and conferences of all kinds, and the role of election campaigns, party congresses, Supreme Soviet sessions and so on, is in large part one of "mobilizing" the population to tackle current national or local objectives. This is what Stalin had in mind when he talked about the Soviets, the trade unions and other so-called "mass organizations" as "driving belts" linking the party and the masses, or "levers" with which the party sets the masses in motion.

The other practical role of the pseudo-democratic machinery—the "sharing of experience" role, is straightforward enough. Meetings, conferences and so on provide opportunities for people facing common tasks to focus on problem areas and difficulties and swap information on how they tackle these difficulties. This is especially valuable for people working in different agencies on the same problems. One of the ailments to which large bureaucratic organizations are prone is poor lateral communication. The Soviet regime has always been very suspicious of lateral communication because of the danger of political collusion or "factionalism". However, by bringing people together in controlled situations like conferences and meetings of soviets, it is able to achieve a degree of lateral communication which is relatively immune to the danger of "factionalism".

The Soviet Union, then, is an authoritarian bureaucratic society. Externally it manifests certain democratic features, but these have long been converted into adjuncts of the authoritarian-bureaucratic system. At the centre stands the source of all authority, a self-perpetuating oligarchy monopolising the key posts at the apex of the main official hierarchies. The shape of this oligarchy is not static. The periods of individual dominance by Lenin, Stalin and Khrushchev—each manifesting distinct levels and styles of dominance—have alternated with periods of ever shifting "collective rule", and these distinct leadership patterns have profoundly affected the current flavour of life in the wider society. Yet these changes have left untouched the underlying authoritarian-bureaucratic structure of Soviet institutions.

If we view Soviet institutions as one vast, complex amalgam of bureaucracies, does this commit us to the view that all that these do is passively to transmit down the line the decisions of the leadership, that they have no active life of their own, that there is no feedback through the bureaucracies from the wider society to the leadership? By no means. Leadership in any large organization must rely heavily on information coming up from below, must take account of the mentality and vital interests of various groups in the organization, and must come to terms with the efforts of members of the organization to exploit their positions to further their individual and group interests. There *is* politics in the Soviet Union, and, like politics

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anywhere, it is a confused tangle of personal rivalries and ambition, organizational conflict, differences of policy, outlook and principle, and the competing claims of occupational, local, ethnic and other interests. However, unlike the largely open, public and institutionalized politics of a country like Australia, it is a concealed politics, played out almost entirely in and between the offices, boards and committees of the various bureaucratic hierarchies: more akin to the behind-the-scenes and (it is said) sometimes quite vicious politics found in giant business corporations in the West.

The fact that politics of a sort occurs in the Soviet Union therefore does not invalidate our picture of the bureaucratic character of the Soviet system. There is, however, a more serious qualification we must make to this picture, which involves looking again more closely at the question of democracy, this time in a historical rather than a static frame of reference.

Before the First World War one of the channels, probably the main channel, through which democratic ideals and attitudes penetrated into Central and Eastern Europe was the Marxist and working class movement, which took the political form of the social democratic parties. This applied in Russia too. However, the Russian Social Democratic party was also strongly influenced by the traditions of the Russian revolutionary movement, which had a marked elitist and authoritarian side to it. This elitist and authoritarian strain was particularly marked in Lenin, and he imparted it to his so-called "bolshevik" wing of the party, which later became the Russian Communist Party. But it did not wholly supplant the democratic tradition.

Democratic and authoritarian elements co-existed in the underground bolshevik party before 1917, and they continued to co-exist after the party seized power. On the one hand the bolsheviks set up a regime which, as Lenin frankly admitted, was "in essence" the dictatorship of the Communist Party, and suppressing all public criticism. On the other hand, there remained a good deal of democracy in the party itself, both in the discussion of policy and the choosing of its leading bodies. It is sometimes imagined that it was Stalin who was to blame for the suppression of this democratic side of the party, but this is quite wrong. The crucial period was 1919-1921. The Civil War was at its height, it was a bitter fight to the death, and to win it the Communist leadership resorted to a total bureaucratic mobilization of society and a total military discipline throughout society. This total discipline extended to the party itself, where it generated a full-time party machine controlled by its hierarchy of secretaries. Power became concentrated in the hands of a small oligarchy within the Central Committee, known as the Politburo. These developments provoked widespread misgivings within the party, misgivings that were voiced by opposition groups that emerged in 1920. As the Civil War drew to a close, the oligarchy began to make concessions and to restore elements of democracy inside the party. They allowed the election of delegates to the 10th Congress in March 1921 to take place on the basis of rival platforms put forward by

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different groups of members, including the opposition groups. But in the midst of this, there erupted a whole wave of peasant revolts and strikes, culminating in a mutiny at the Kronstadt Naval base, which, up to then, had been a major Communist stronghold. At this point the leadership panicked, and decided the only safe thing was to restore the Civil War pattern of rule, that is to say a Politburo oligarchy, imposing its authority through a disciplined party machine. They pushed through the party congress a ban on "factionalism", which was defined in such a way as to cover any kind of collusion between party members in opposition to the oligarchy or their policies. Dissenters inside the party were expelled, while those outside the party were arrested by the political police.

The triumph of the authoritarian-bureaucratic principle over the democratic principle in the bolshevik tradition was thus a product of the Lenin era. All elements of democracy did not disappear overnight, partly because of differences within the oligarchy and partly because memories of a more democratic kind of party were still strong among the older party officials and rank and file. But the 10th Congress gave Soviet democracy its *coup de grace,* even if it took a few more years to expire.

What these events show is that the roots of Russia's authoritarian-bureaucratic system were not the socialist economic order, and not the defects of Stalin's or anyone else's character—these roots were political. The system became entrenched because Russia's communist leaders saw in it the only guarantee of staying in power and maintaining order. And the twin problems of power and order are the reason the system has been maintained ever since. They are the reason, too, why the institutions of socialism in Russia, as they took shape in the twenties and early thirties, were also set in this authoritarian-bureaucratic mould.

How effective has this authoritarian-bureaucratic system been as a way of organizing society? I think the broad answer is that it has been effective in achieving some of the broad priority goals which the political leadership has set for the society as a whole, but ineffective in achieving specialized goals proper to particular spheres of activity. The collective farm system is a good example. Legally the collective farms are co-operatives, but in practice they are controlled and run by party and government agencies. The collective farm system has proved an extremely inefficient way of organizing primary production. Soviet farms employ about three times the proportion of the national labour force employed by Australian farms, yet the country has difficulty maintaining food consumption levels far inferior to those acceptable in Australia. But in one respect the system has been supremely successful. It has made industrialization possible by providing a means for extracting food for the rapidly growing cities, while keeping the farmers on a pittance. Or we could take a completely different example—painting and sculpture. What works of art are accepted for exhibition and public consumption is decided by the Union of Soviet Artists, under the watchful eye of the Culture Department of the Party Central Committee.

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One result is that in the international world of the visual arts, the Soviet Union might as well not exist. When one considers the great creativity of Russian art in the first quarter of this century, the authoritarian-bureaucratic system has obviously been disastrous for the specialized goals proper to this particular field of activity. But it has ensured that Soviet artists have not confronted the general public with awkward questions or disturbing images, and no doubt helped in the inculcation of the civic virtues in quite a few Russian hearts; in this way it has served the larger ends of society, as these are perceived by the political leadership. The system has proved a successful way of mobilizing resources for priority objectives, like building up the steel industry, but has been injurious to those activities which are sensitive to individual needs and preferences, like the consumer industries. In general, its performance has been good on quantity, poor on quality—with rare exceptions, like ballistics, where quality requires large-scale organization. It has given Soviet citizens plenty to be proud of as a nation, but little to enjoy as individuals.

Against this background, what can one say about the prospects for change in Soviet society? There are two powerful influences making for change, tending to push Soviet society, that is, away from the authoritarian-bureaucratic system. The first influence is that this society has now moved into a phase where quantitative improvement is becoming less and less important, and qualitative change more and more important, while the party is gradually coming to realize that in many fields qualitative improvement requires the abdication of close bureaucratic control, so that the criteria of success proper to the particular field can effectively operate. This means allowing some room for sponteneity and therefore accepting the risk of errors being made. The main area where this has happened so far is the natural sciences, which have been substantially released from close bureaucratic and ideological controls, and this has tentatively spread to some of the more technical branches of the social sciences. In these areas there is now a real market in ideas, rather than a bureaucratically imposed orthodoxy. At the same time, we have the first cautious steps towards introducing market elements into the operation of the economy. It is claimed that these market elements have already achieved improvements in the range and quality of goods and services provided. But it is also clear that they are running into obstacles and difficulties which arise from the still intact prerogatives of the bureaucratic control mechanism, particularly that of the party itself. They are beginning to experience something of the dilemma the Czechoslovaks found themselves in in 1967, when it was realized that their rather more ambitious marketization of the economy could only be made to work if it was accompanied by political changes to modify the authoritarian-bureaucratic system. This was not mere rhetoric on the part of Czech reformers, not just a quasi-Marxist rationalization for changes that they really wanted for their own sake, though no doubt there were elements of this in the situation. Nor should we be surprised that

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de-bureaucratization of such a key area of life as the economy should raise immediate implications for the overall authoritarian-bureaucratic system of Soviet-type societies, when we recall how the system originated. It was political requirements that gave rise to the system, and set the framework within which the economic institutions evolved. The economic institutions cannot now be substantially changed without shattering that framework, and replacing it with something looser.

This brings us to the second influence for change. We saw earlier that the democratic language and democratic forms with which the authoritarian-bureaucratic system surrounds itself derive from a genuinely democratic strand in the Russian communist tradition. There are grounds for believing that this democratic tradition is not so much dead, as was implied earlier, but rather preserved by these democratic forms and language in a state of suspended animation. There have been a whole range of instances in the post-Stalin period which show that when circumstances are favourable, these frozen democratic forms are capable of stirring into life. The most important example of this is the partial revival of the full Central Committee as a kind of parliament of the party.

In my opinion, given the capacity of these democratic features to revive, and given the existence of pressures making for a looser institutional structure, towards more autonomy for various aspects of the life of society, we *could* see a pretty profound shaking up and modification of the authoritarian-bureaucratic system if favourable political circumstances provided the opportunity. The kind of political circumstances that would favour this would be a reasonably reassuring international atmosphere, moderating the leaders' fears of the consequences of public disunity, coinciding with the prolonged coexistence of policy differences within the Politburo, making for the institutionalization of procedures for peacefully resolving these differences. This could lead to a sudden breakthrough to a looser and more open system, such as occurred in Czechoslovakia early in 1968. But to mention Czechoslovakia is to be reminded that we cannot count on this kind of development in the Soviet Union in the foreseeable future. The Soviet "establishment" is still very hesitant to take risks on the issues of power and public order. The fear of what Lenin called "spontaneity"—the Russian word is *stikhiia,* which can equally be translated "chaos", a fact which in itself says much about Soviet political attitudes—this fear is still very strong, as was brought home to me forcibly in conversations with academics and officials in Moscow in 1967. It is not only the party boss type, but, I believe, a large part of the Russian educated classes, who fear that if bureaucratic controls are sharply relaxed the population may very quickly get out of control, and before long they will be at each other's throats. Some also suspect that the Americans and possibly the Germans might be tempted to exploit this situation in a way that would threaten Soviet national security.

To the Western mind these fears may seem fantastically exaggerated.

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Yet Westerners concerned with the values of freedom and democracy would do well to take seriously the problem of public order in a country of such different traditions as Soviet Russia. Certainly, contemplating the modern political history of Russia, it is hard to be optimistic about the capacity of Soviet society to cope with large-scale public disturbances such as have occurred in many Western cities in recent years, without major breakdown. Though thoughtful Western liberals and democrats are beginning to realize that the relationship between freedom and order has a more complex dialectic than they had imagined, simplistic assumptions about this relationship still underlie most comment on internal developments in the Soviet Union. Yet if many Russians think that too much freedom too fast may lead to chaos, and the most likely result of chaos is a reimposition of the authoritarian-bureaucratic system in a more suffocating form than ever, can we be so sure they are wrong?

In the short run the prospects for democracy in Russia are poor. Despite the authoritarian-bureaucratic mould of Soviet politics and society, there exists, as I have argued, a latent capacity for democratization. Granted, it would require a particularly favourable conjuncture of circumstances for this capacity to be actualized, and the circumstances at present, both internally and externally, are far from favourable. Yet the potential remains, and we would be less than completely realistic in our long-term thinking about Russia if we left it out of account.

AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICAL SCIENCE PRIZES FOR 1969

Awards were made to the following first year students in the faculties of Government, Political Science and Public Administration, at the Universities of Sydney, New South Wales and New England respectively:

The University of Sydney: Mr. J. M. L. Woods (1st prize), and Mr. Hugh Craig.

The University of New South Wales: Mr. V. J. Winley.

The University of New England: Mr. B. McClenaghan.

The A.I.P.S. prize for a student of political science at the University of Western Australia was won by Mr. R. J. Wickes, a second year student in the Faculty of Arts. This was the first occasion on which a prize was awarded at the University of Western Australia.

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